

Pregnancy: Baby is home safe and sound but Mum needs help

“Oohh! Ever since the baby it has been so difficult to sit down. My tailbone hurts! Can you help me?” I reply, “Yes I can! But first let me share some information with you so that we have a common understanding of the problem. Then we can begin to work together to resolve your pain.”

Statistics Canada reports that 335,202 children were born in 2003. The Canadian rate of C-sections in that year was 25.6%. While pregnancy and giving birth to children is a natural experience for most women, some develop problems later on. In some cases the delivery process can change the position of both the bones of the pelvis and of the spine. In addition, C-section scars inhibit movement of the uterus and indirectly influence movement of the back. The scar can be a factor in post-partum low back pain if it restricts skeletal movements. For many women, back pain, leg pain and fatigue come to be accepted as “the new normal”.

Many of these issues can be addressed by a physiotherapist who is trained in gentle, structural manual therapy techniques. These techniques are ones which help body tissues return to normal mechanical relationships and movement potential. They employ a touch that use pressures as light as 5 grams, the weight of a nickel! Structural manual therapy can comfortably address low back pain, postural changes, soft tissue restrictions that are secondary to scars, and stress associated with childbirth.

The body prepares itself for delivery by secreting a hormone called relaxin which allows ligaments to stretch. This flexibility of the ligaments helps the labour and delivery process and continues for about 3 months after the baby is delivered.

Unfortunately there is no automatic return to optimal alignment for the bones of the pelvis as the ligaments tighten. Often the sacrum (the wedge shaped bone between the spine and the tailbone) is out of alignment. Muscle spasm and scar tissues may prevent joints from achieving a good

mechanical balance. If the pelvic bones and sacrum are tilted to one side or twisted, the alignment of the spinal column will be altered. This can cause back or leg pain from stress on ligaments or from irritation of nervous tissue. The mechanical pressures of carrying an infant on one hip may also prevent the return of joints to normal, causing pain. If there is poor mechanical balance, women may notice changes in posture and experience difficulty in getting up from a seated position, climbing stairs, and/or lifting.

Several British anaesthetists have published studies on low back pain and epidurals. Richard Russel completed a survey of more than 1000 women who had delivered their first child. At six months, 29.5% continued to have complaints of low back pain. More than 50% of this group reported that back pain was a new event in their lives. Commonly these women had had epidurals. This brings to light a debate within medical circles regarding the relationship between epidurals and back pain. Does the body react to the epidural procedure? Do subtle adhesions (of the dura) develop as a result of the procedure? The answer is not clear. Russel concluded that the back pain tended to be postural and not severe. This type of postural discomfort can be relieved by structural manual therapy techniques when a therapist is able to restore the normal movement pattern of the dura.

Jean Pierre Barral, a French osteopath has described the normal movement patterns of the organs in response to the expansion and contraction of the lungs. After a C-section, the question is: "How well do these organs move in the presence of the scar?" Myofascial release is a technique that addresses restrictions in soft tissues (including organs). The therapist uses gentle forces to take the pressures off the soft tissues next to the scar. This can help the body to readjust tensions around the scar which then allows better movement mechanics of the uterus. Barral's work leads to other realizations about the effects of pregnancy on the organ system. As the fetus grows and reaches maturity, pelvic and abdominal organs may become compressed, twisted and, perhaps, irritated by the

pressure and movement of the fetus. It is likely that the organs develop some restrictions in movement during the pregnancy. These will influence the movement pattern of the organ system. Optimal post-partum health comes when the health movement patterns (motilities) of the organs are restored and palpable.

There is a real, often unrecognized need for rest and relaxation in the first few weeks after the baby has arrived. A recommendation that has continued for generations states: "Sleep when the baby sleeps!" Acupressure can be used to promote systemic relaxation. The fingertips are used to gently stimulate acupoints or the "windows" of the acupressure meridians. This stimulation helps the body to improve the capacity or work potential of the acupressure system. Acupressure can be used for its relaxation and stress-relieving effects. Its effects will allow a tired mother to truly rest and feel restored after sleep.

A young woman who found her first labour quite daunting came to me for a treatment. The normally cheerful woman was tired, listless, and acknowledged that she was having trouble connecting with her baby. An acupressure protocol for stress relief was used to address her low vitality and at the end of the treatment session she felt a change. Her comment was: "When I came to see you I did not realize that today was such a bright sunny day."

Another mother who came for help because she had difficulty sitting had had an easy pregnancy. However, her labour was prolonged and ended with an emergency C-section. A simple therapeutic approach relieved the muscle spasm that was distorting the position of the tailbone. The technique is called positional release. Gentle palpation along the sacroiliac joints found areas of tension. Mechanical fulcrums applied with fingertip pressure along the joint lines allowed the tension to dissipate. As this happened normal joint movement returned. She went home feeling quite comfortable.

Often, women do not realize that their post-partum problems have solutions. Gentle contract-relax techniques known as muscle energy are very helpful. Indirect soft tissue work called myofascial release gives the body the opportunity to re-adjust in a gentle, natural manner. Myofascial release techniques improve the mobility of scar tissue and reduce muscle spasm. Neural tissue techniques and craniosacral therapy address tensions within the nervous system. Planned rest periods and the use of relaxation methods help the young mother to overcome fatigue.

After a pregnancy it is possible to regain healthy pelvic and spinal joint alignment. This is important to prevent long-term back pain. The muscles of the pelvic floor can also recovery their strength and return to a normal functional state. With appropriate self-care and professional support, women do regain their health after their pregnancy.

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